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ABSTRACT

The importance of reading in curriculum for gifted students is emphasized in the digest which also examines reading curriculum strategies. Highly able readers are seen to have needs for specific assistance in developing more complex skills in choosing books and materials for particular purposes, and in applying learning to real-life problems. Components of superior reading curricula should include language-related strategies, context-related strategies, meaning-related strategies, and reasoning-related strategies. The types of books which present complex concepts in interesting and unusual ways are advocated as particularly valuable for gifted youth. It is further suggested that books for gifted readers be judged on the quality of language, substantiveness of content, and complexity of structure. The potential benefit of carefully chosen and applied software in the reading curriculum is noted. (CL)

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DIGEST

READING FOR THE GIFTED

Reading is the single most important component in any curriculum for gifted children. Not only is that skill essential for the mastery of all other subjects, but it allows youngsters to pursue their intellectual interests both inside and outside the classroom. Researchers continue to report reading as an activity of singular importance in the lives of gifted youth who, through books, can control the depth, pacing, direction, sequence, quantity, quality, and complexity of their learning. Books remain the most accessible, affordable, and pleasurable tool for fostering cognitive growth and independence. Reading surpasses even direct experience in this task since such knowledge is obviously limited by time, place, accessibility, and the like.

What Are the Critical Issues Relating to Reading and Gifted Children?

By the time gifted youngsters enter school, those skills that are typically developed in reading readiness activities or even considerable decoding ability may already be present. This is a direct cue to the teacher that advanced instruction should be scheduled. These students' need to improve fluency may be satisfied easily through extended exposure to appealing subject matter. But they will require specific assistance in developing more complex skills, in choosing books and other related materials for particular purposes, in evaluating the relevance, quality, and validity of their choices, and in selecting appropriate strategies for drawing inferences, integrating new knowledge into previously acquired understanding, and devising ways of applying what has been learned to real life problems. Additionally, highly able readers need to function at a metacognitive level—to become aware of how they are learning, which style of learning is most effective or rewarding, or, conversely, which elements in the reading context may be hindering efficiency. As it is likely that these students will be frequent users of libraries, they will need guidance in learning how to identify and exploit the vast array of relevant, available resources and employ them to address both their informational and recreational needs.

What Constitutes a Superior Reading Curriculum for Gifted Children?

Such a program will include a variety of reading strategies which are based on student readiness and the demands of the moment, rather than on the child's chronological age or grade assignment. Included should be language-related strategies (vocabulary extension, cloze); context-related strategies (skimming, rereading, determining appropriate connotations); meaning-related strategies (drawing inferences, making predictions); and reasoning-related strategies (extrapolating or generalizing from the text).

To respond to reading requirements in the content areas as well as to satisfy the expectation that information goals will be achieved through multidisciplinary approaches, specific activities in applying knowledge gained through reading should be included. Each discipline has its own vocabulary, means of expression, conventions, and techniques for ordering and displaying information. The means for interpreting these variations must be part of the reading program. Graphs, charts, maps, diagrams, schemata of various sorts, and other visual presentations often require special instruction, as do such "codes" as weather and chemical symbols, music and dance notation, etc.

Special attention should be directed toward introducing, analyzing, and exploring in depth the various components which make up our literary tradition. Each genre requires a particularized approach and varying skills in comprehending its dimensions and enjoying its special attributes. As students become more competent in distinguishing between literal and literary accounts, they will be able to recognize metaphorical language, irony, jests, symbolism, and those common literary devices which embody subtleties and multiple layers of meaning. Reading experiences should be grand in scope, incorporating complex concepts from multiple perspectives, cultures, and time periods—an approach useful in expanding students' world view. The other language arts must constantly be incorporated into the reading curriculum, providing options for students whereby they can explore and demonstrate their newly acquired understanding.

What Books Are Particularly Valuable for Gifted Youth?

Books serve a host of developmental, recreational, and informational functions. For ordinary purposes, one title may be as serviceable as another. However, just as all meals are not equally nourishing, so books vary greatly in their capacity to provide food for thought. Gifted children are often prepared to address complex concepts at an early age, hence their reading needs are qualitatively different from those of their peers. Their reading material must receive close scrutiny to assess whether the salient features of those books have potential for fulfilling the extraordinary demands to be made of them.

Fictional works containing unidimensional characters, hackneyed plots, simplistic structures, cliche-ridden language, and stale overworked themes are often available but are clearly inadequate since such material offers only a bland, passionless, intellectual encounter. Likewise, nonfiction titles that may appear impressive but are little more than compendia of data make minimal demands on users, asking only that they note, store in memory, and recall basic facts as needed. Informational books which present absorbing, detailed information, generate excitement through fascinating and unusual connections or organiza-

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tion, provoke thought or wonderment by their overt or subtle revelation of ideas and possibilities, raise new and undreamed of questions, inspire reveries, or instigate novel or further research projects are another matter altogether. Informational books which put the reader in the place of the professional confronting the real questions of the discipline and fictional material which ignites the imagination by insight and eloquence have invaluable, indispensable attributes. Reliance on basals, standard texts, or prepackaged programs using some kind of a formula approach deny the need for individualization, depress the development of a sense of personal taste, and chill enthusiasm for the delights of the carefully chosen word and the artfully realized literary work.

How Can Cognitively Stimulating Reading Material Be Identified?

Books for gifted readers should be judged on the quality of language, substantiveness of content, and complexity of structure. Language is the single most critical tool for thinking. Until experiences are linguistically processed, they cannot be digested, integrated, compared, or evaluated. The formulation of new ideas, the generation of original proposals, or solutions to problems (creative thought) is dependent upon language. Books that employ rich, varied, accurate, precise, complex, and exciting language are the premier source for stimulating cognitive growth.

Gifted children need exposure to quantities of information and a wide spectrum of ideas of more than immediate or ephemeral value. Subjects of a profound and compelling nature can be found even in books addressed to very young children.

Reading may be a relatively passive endeavor or it may necessitate continuous contemplation, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation. Structure determines how a reader will think about the contents of a book. It is essential that complex structures be encountered in juvenile literature, not only as a preparation for adult reading, but because such literary architecture requires cognitive engagement as the student reaches to understand paradoxical, ambiguous and unresolved elements. Such attributes allow for the delivery of more subtle, multifaceted, and sophisticated messages which may have the effect, in turn, of prompting gifted students to undertake even more difficult intellectual challenges and give them the background to successfully complete such enterprises.

How Does Software Interface with the Reading Curriculum?

Just as the invention of the printing press in the 15th century transformed communication and brought in its wake an unprecedented flowering of literacy, so the advent of the microchip in our era has revolutionized how we process information and even how we conceptualize that process. Books remain the prime carriers of literary messages but are no longer the sole agents for organizing and disseminating information. Computers enable the user to manipulate, reorganize, store and retrieve, model, restructure, visualize, and otherwise edit alphanumeric information. When carefully chosen software is used for problem-solving, simulation, authoring, and the like, it shares with books the ability of advancing and refining higher level thinking skills of readers, providing another important opportunity to master symbolic material and refashion it as their will and imagination allow.

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